

Project Description:

Our client, an experienced neo-natal physician, wanted to create a home-like space for expectant mothers to safely have their babies, for less than the cost of a hospital. He saw building Minneapolis' first birth center as the solution. The once beautiful home had been converted to a triplex and had become quite dilapidated. This project restored the home's former beauty, as it was gutted inside and out, with only the bones being untouched. All of the windows, siding, wiring, plumbing, interior walls, heating and cooling, and finishes were removed and replaced, with only a few exceptions – beautiful historic woodwork and stained glass were saved, restored and reused in several places. Period appropriate finishes were used throughout, including decorative ceiling medallions and moldings in the birthing suites. In many places, original finishes were mimicked, such as at the front entry, where the new tile inlay closely resembles the original.

Now there are two birthing rooms with beds, tubs, storage cabinets, and bathrooms on the first floor, as well as a large entryway open to the second floor, a reception area, and an exam room. The second floor contains a living room, dining room, and powder room for waiting families, as well as an office, kitchenette, bathroom, and bedroom for staff.

A major challenge was working with the City of Minneapolis to define what a Birth Center is. Because this was the first Birth Center in the city, zoning did not know how to define it, and basically forbade any work until the issue was cleared up. We worked with the owner to help get legislation passed in the Minnesota State House and Senate to define Birth Centers, after which we worked with the City of Minneapolis to interpret the new statute. In the end, we ended up with an R3 designation, which was quite a favorable outcome, allowing us to build the project without an elevator or commercial sprinkler system.

We followed the EPA's RRP lead law, which was challenging on such a large project. We were able to do this by abating all of the lead at the beginning of the project (by gutting everything), then rebuilding as usual. This required huge amounts of poly to keep lead-contaminated debris and dust from being released into the neighborhood. A poly tunnel from the interior of the home to the dumpster was constructed so that workers would not have to be constantly putting on and taking off their Tyvek suits every time they needed to bring a load to the dumpster. Because following the lead law added significantly to the cost of the project, there was discussion about tearing down the home and starting over from scratch. The decision was made to go the more expensive route of restoring the existing building because of its beautiful historic nature, and because the scale and age of the home fit so perfectly with the neighborhood.

Another challenge was that the existing building is less than three feet from the north property line, meaning that code would not allow any windows on that side. We were able to work with the city to get the old windows grandfathered in and to put in new sashes since that was the only way to meet energy code.

The project took an old, dilapidated, abandoned triplex in a transitional neighborhood and turned it into a beautiful new Birth Center. The historic character of the home was maintained through careful selection of appropriate finishes and preservation of original buffets and stained glass. Cabinetry in the birthing rooms designed to mimic period furniture pieces are used to store medical supplies and equipment in a manner that preserves the residential feel. The exterior was finished in a way that respects history and the neighborhood, and though it is now a commercial property, it fits in well with its residential setting. The neighbors are happy that the formerly dilapidated house is now beautiful, and the owners are thrilled with the results. It has already been the site of several births.